Discovery Learning vs. Project Approach

Discovery Learning is a teaching approach where students formulate and test their own ideas and solutions to problems through hands on interaction with their environment. The teacher provides background knowledge and typically poses a question, and then students have a chance to investigate and create their own experiments. This model focuses on how students came to their conclusions and what they learned.

The Project Approach incorporates questioning, research methods, investigations and experiments into a student-chosen unit of study. Once the student has reached answered their research question, they create a product of some sort to show their learning and share it with others. This model focuses both on the process of learning for the student and the outcome of the learning process.

Although these two models are very similar in that they each encourage students to direct their own learning to some degree and put a large emphasis on the process of learning, they also have many differences regarding the direction of the teacher within the classroom.

Discovery Learning is typically more guided by the teacher with the student having little or no opportunities to determine what subjects they want to learn about. The teacher decides on a topic of learning, develops background knowledge with the students, poses a question for the students to answer, and assesses how the students came to their answer. The student is in charge of the inquiry part of their learning. They determine their own conclusions to the problem and show their own process of drawing those conclusions. Within the Project approach, the teacher has a very small role in determining subject studied, learning processes used and student outcomes. A topic of study is determined, then a question or problem is chosen, and objectives for learning are developed. These are all decided to a large degree by the student, with the teacher offering guidance or direction where necessary. Then the student does their research and shares it while being assessed based on the objectives determined at the beginning of the study.

Since Discovery Learning is slightly more teacher directed, assessment and objectives are less complicated to determine. Discovery Learning typically takes state or school objectives and teaches them in a way that students will have a more personal connection with their learning. However, the Project Approach typically looks at the topic of study first, and then determines which state or school objectives that topic will cover. Since Discovery learning is more teacher directed, it is much easier for the teacher to manage the classroom and time constraints than the more open ended Project Approach.

Both of these models focus on teaching students how to become self directed learners. They each focus more on showing how or why something works the way it does instead of simply saying that it works. They are also versatile in incorporating different sized groups, many collaborative opportunities and time to share their learning with others. Due to this open ended style, both of these models can accommodate many of the 21st Century Fluencies depending on the topic of study, the methods used to achieve the goals of learning, and the methods of assessment.